

Rocky Mountain News

Coming to grips with bouldering

By Janet Reese, Special to the News
July 9, 2005

Off with the ropes. Off with the carabiners. Welcome to the world of bouldering, where all you need is rock, chalk, shoes and pad.

Modern bouldering began in the 1960s as a training sport for technical rock climbers but has evolved into a popular sport all its own, complete with lingo and "superstars."

John Gill, the father of modern bouldering, described the sport as "a kind of gymnastic enterprise, similar to formal, competitive gymnastics and involving the use of chalk, spotting, safety or crash pads and dynamics."

Bouldering is a style of climbing that involves scaling routes called "problems" on low-lying rocks without using ropes. Novice or intermediate climbers will climb no higher than a point where they feel comfortable jumping off, usually 12 to 15 feet. Bouldering beyond 18 feet is called "highballing," part of a trend in climbing faster and higher, said bouldering expert Mike Brooks, who runs the resource Web site frontrangebouldering.com.

Adam McKenzie, 22, one of the sport's superstars, boulders outside, in rock gyms and at competitions. At Castlewood Canyon, he ascends problems twice a week during the summer. He places his crash pad beneath an overhanging boulder, squats into a sit-start position and curls his chalked fingers around thin fingertip holds - they are known as "crimps" - in the rock. He plants his feet and powers up the overhanging rock, like a fly climbing a wall, until he reaches the top, or "tops out."

McKenzie is not alone in his pursuit of seemingly impossible-to-ascend problems. Bouldering is exploding in popularity because it's fun, social, requires simple gear and can be undertaken on boulders - natural or artificial ones in neighborhood rock gyms.

Bouldering is not risk-free; proper training and the use of a crash pad are highly recommended. Most boulderers use ground spotters to follow their



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Billy Watson, 15, reaches for the next crimp to hang on to during a bouldering outing last year in Crawford, Texas. It is a style of climbing involving scaling routes called "problems."

moves on the rock as an additional safety asset. They work problems with crews - three or four people who take turns climbing, spotting and coaching one another. Coaching provides valuable "beta" - ideas and instructions on where to make the next move.

Unlike roped climbing, bouldering relies on mental and physical energy rather than mastery of equipment. Strong fingers, core strength, good footwork and determination are essentials.

McKenzie's agile 5-foot-6, 120-pound frame serves him well in gravity-defying moves. But he assures beginners they don't have to be lightweight or strong initially to succeed in the sport.

"If you're committed and work hard, you'll adapt," McKenzie said. "You can make quick progress in bouldering and overcome your fears as you improve."

Said Brooks: "While bouldering generally is safer than roped climbing, the sport has a bigger impact on the environment. Boulderers tend to travel in groups. People, pets and crash pads take a toll on the environment."

Climbers are encouraged to practice "A Bouldering Ethic" and join the Access Fund, a national, nonprofit climbers' organization that works to keep climbing areas open and to protect the climbing environment.

Hard-core boulderers take the sport to a higher, competitive level at the annual Teva Mountain Games staged in June in Vail. More than 70 climbers compete in bouldering, speed bouldering and dyno-bouldering and on a massive mushroom-shaped, artificial boulder marked with brightly colored holds that define set routes.

In speed bouldering, two climbers race up and across the severely overhanging wall in 10 seconds or less. Dyno-bouldering involves the complete and sudden shift of a climber's entire body weight from one hold to another.

"(Competitions) are excellent for practicing skills," said Scott Rennak, founder of the American Bouldering Series competitions and the Vail exhibition. "Comps are fun, fast-paced and an opportunity for people to get together and create a community of climbers from around the country. Incentives include national television exposure, thousands of cheering fans and cash prizes."

Rennak sees new trends emerging from competitions.

"The sport is evolving from static to more dynamic moves as those seen in the dyno comps," he said. "Physically demanding and stressful on the body, bouldering traditionally attracts younger people. But now it's attracting even younger climbers, ages 12 to 16, who start in climbing gyms."

McKenzie offers bouldering advice that could serve as a lifelong philosophy: "Never give up, just keep pushing yourself and find people that will push you to the next level."

Bouldering resources

Web sites

- **FrontRangeBouldering.com:** Where to boulder outdoors and in rock gyms. Interviews with expert boulderers; Web links and pictures; weather report.
- **RockComps.com:** Bouldering competitions run by the American Bouldering Series, an organization that promotes and supports fun bouldering competitions across the country for people of all ages and abilities.
- **Rock-Climbing-Guide.com:** Discusses bouldering terms, gear.
- **AccessFund.org:** About the Access Fund.
- **JohnGill.net:** John Gill's Web site. A climbing memoir.

Books

- *Colorado Bouldering 2* by Phillip Benningfield and Matt Samet: Descriptions of and directions to popular Colorado outdoor bouldering sites. Introduction includes "A Bouldering Ethic," environmental impacts and more.
- *Better Bouldering* by John Sherman: A good primer on bouldering from the How to Rock Climb Series.
- *Master of Rock* by Pat Ament: How bouldering began and the man behind its fame - Gill.

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